



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations  
Council on Postsecondary Education  
**OFFICE OF THE POSTSECONDARY COMMISSIONER**  
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Enclosure 5b3  
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**Barbara S. Cottam**  
**Chair**

TO: Members of the Council on Postsecondary Education

**Council on Elementary and  
Secondary Education**

FROM: Jim Purcell, Ed.D, Commissioner for Postsecondary Education

**Daniel P. McConaghy**  
**Chair**

DATE: April 4, 2016

RE: RIC Proposal for a B.A. in Liberal Studies

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**Background**

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Rhode Island College (RIC) is proposing to offer a BA in Liberal Studies. RIC had offered a Bachelor's in General Studies which was closed in 2009. RIC states that this degree is an interdisciplinary major "emphasizing the breadth of study, independence of thought, and flexibility while proving a strong, rigorous grounding in the liberal arts." Further, the college notes that the goal of the program is to provide graduates with a well-rounded education, a broad understanding of the natural and social world and appropriate skills for personal, professional and social development.

**Council on Postsecondary  
Education**

**Rationale**

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The BA in Liberal Studies is presented as a program which would be attractive to a diverse student population that includes students who have a strong interest in interdisciplinary approaches, transfer students who have completed an Associate Degree in Liberal Arts or General Studies at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI), undecided students who are not interested in a specific major, and students who left college after earning some credits and wish to complete a degree. The proposal states that in a rapidly changing economic environment, flexibility is key and narrow job training may lead to obsolescence rather than long-term employability. An interdisciplinary Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies fosters skills and competencies that are in demand in today's job market. A 2013 survey entitled *It Takes More than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* by Hart Research Associates lists attributes of job candidates sought by employers. The most frequently mentioned attributes were:

- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills (82% of employers)
- The ability to analyze and solve complex problems (81% of employers)
- The ability to effectively communicate orally (80% of employers)
- The ability to effectively communicate in writing (80% of employers)

All liberal arts majors foster these skills by training students to ask incisive questions, engage in careful research, and communicate the results clearly. Ninety-three percent (93%) of the employers surveyed agreed that “a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.”<sup>1</sup>

The proposal cites research that suggests an interdisciplinary major confers valuable job-related skills beyond those gained in traditional discipline-based liberal arts majors. Allen Repko, a noted author on interdisciplinary studies, identifies several benefits of interdisciplinary study for workforce development. In an interdisciplinary major:

1. Students learn how to recognize and deal with complexity of all kinds, make connections, and integrate information from multiple sources. Seventy-two percent of the employers surveyed by Hart Associates named the “ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources” as a valuable employee skill.
2. Students better understand the perspectives of coworkers who have been trained in specific disciplines. Because interdisciplinary students are trained to appreciate and adopt multiple perspectives, they have enhanced teamwork skills.
3. Students develop a critical understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of narrow, disciplinary perspectives. An interdisciplinary approach teaches students how to identify and overcome biases that come from a narrow focus on one particular discipline’s approach.
4. Students master “informed borrowing” from the perspectives of different disciplines. By exploiting multiple perspectives, an interdisciplinary approach aids in the search for creative solutions to the complex problems faced by business, governments, and other organizations.<sup>1</sup>

### **Institutional Role**

A liberal studies degree fits within the college’s stated mission: “Rhode Island College personalizes higher education of the finest quality for undergraduate and graduate students. We offer vibrant programs in arts and sciences, business and professional disciplines within a supportive, respectful and diverse community.” The program represents a unique collaboration among the faculty in all departments within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Faculty from seven departments participated in developing the program design.

The proposal suggests that this degree prepares students for many graduate programs in the liberal arts and some professional programs such as the Master of Social Work.

### **Interinstitutional Considerations**

This program can be seen as an extension and a completion degree for the Associate Degrees in Liberal Arts or General Studies offered at CCRI. Students should be able to transfer from CCRI to RIC easily. Given the broad range of courses available to students in this major, many courses are already included in transfer agreements negotiated under Council for Postsecondary Education’s Transfer and Articulation Policy.

The proposed Liberal Studies degree is different from URI’s Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies in that it does not contain majors within the program, nor is it designed solely for students who have been out of school for three or more years.

Providence College offers liberal studies degrees (Associate of Arts and Bachelor’s of Arts) that require students to take a leadership course. Johnson and Wales University offers a Liberal Studies Bachelor of Science Degree requiring a minor in General Business or Project Management plus an experiential learning component.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Repko, *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies*, Sage Publications, 2014.

Regionally, a BA in Liberal Arts is offered at Southern Connecticut State University, the University of New Haven, St. Joseph College, the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, and Bentley University. In addition, several regional institutions including Harvard, Wesleyan, Goddard, Dartmouth and some SUNY campuses offer an M.A. in Liberal studies.

### **Program**

Students take two required courses:

- LIBS 261 Introduction to the Liberal Studies – an introduction to theory and methods of interdisciplinary research in which students prepare a formal research proposal for an interdisciplinary research project to be completed in LIBS 461. (4 credits)
- LIBS 461 Liberal Studies Seminar – a culminating experience for Liberal Studies majors in which students prepare and present a project bringing together materials and methods from several disciplines. (4 credits)

Students must take 11 additional courses. To ensure breadth of understanding, students must select at least one course from each of five areas: Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Mathematics and Natural and Physical Sciences. No more than three courses may be taken in any one area. Courses used to meet general education requirements cannot be counted toward major requirements. Students take 41-56 credits toward the concentration and 120 credits for the liberal arts degree.

The Liberal Studies major requires students, in consultation with the Liberal Studies director, to construct a concentration that brings a variety of disciplines to bear on an issue, question, or problem of interest. An interdisciplinary committee of faculty (representing the departments that designed the major) will review each student's plan of study. Examples of concentrations include: the Infrastructure Crisis in the United States, Public Policy and the Arts, or Environmental Justice. Students will be encouraged to minor in a traditional field of study or declare a second major. To prepare for employment, students will be encouraged to seek an internship, which will count toward meeting the course requirements.

### **Students**

The college expects to attract enrollees from the following populations:

- Students who are undecided and not interested in exploring majors (i.e., metamajors)
- Adult students returning to RIC through Finish Strong
- Students interested in liberal arts and interdisciplinary approaches
- Transfer students, especially from CCRI with a Liberal Arts degree
- Option for students who are changing from original major or aren't retained in competitive majors

The college anticipates an enrollment of 25 students by the end of the 2017-2018 academic year with 6-8 graduates annually.

### **Evaluation**

RIC plans to use the following as the primary measures of evaluation:

- Enrollment
- Retention and graduation rates
- Credit at graduation
- Assessment of student learning outcomes
- Feedback from students

Based on these measures of evaluation, RIC will reassess the structure of the program and consider changes such as possibly requiring a minor or an internship.

**Financial Viability**

The program is cost-effective in requiring two new courses with the remainder being drawn from courses that already exist and are offered.

**RIOPC Review**

RIOPC staff reviewed the information on the proposed Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies degree supplied by Rhode Island College. The academic changes presented are within the mission, role and scope of Rhode Island College and do not require Council approval.